

TO: Senate Co-Chair Andrew J. McDonald  
House Co-Chair Michael P. Lawlor  
Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Judiciary

FROM: Hon. Beverly K. Streit-Kefalas, Probate Judge, District of Milford  
70 West River Street, Milford, CT 06460

RE: H.B. 6027, An Act Concerning Probate Court Reforms

DATE: March 9, 2009

I am Judge Beverly Streit-Kefalas, Probate Judge for the District of Milford. I was admitted to the bar in December 1990 and was 1<sup>st</sup> elected as Milford's probate judge in November 1998. In addition to working with my colleagues to establish the first Regional Children's Probate Court in New Haven, I was the temporary "start up" administrative judge for the Meriden Wallingford and the New London Regional Children's Probate Courts.

The Milford Probate District serves a community of approximately 55,000 people.<sup>1</sup> It is a typical Connecticut suburban community- we are not immune to drug addiction and alcoholism, the increasing needs of a growing senior population and a broad spectrum of income and educational needs and levels.

I am here today in support of H.B. 6027, An Act Concerning Probate Court Reforms. The probate court system serves a critical legal need in the State of Connecticut. The majority of matters in our probate system involve senior citizens struggling with dementia and other age - related functioning disabilities, children often living in poverty and with parents who struggle to recover from or are relapsing back into drug and alcohol addiction.

I thank the Judiciary Committee and the State Legislature for supporting our Regional Children's Probate Courts. Our first court in New Haven opened four and one-half (4 ½) years ago and it continues to excel in protecting and supporting our families. Its framework of a partnership with on-site DCF social workers and on-staff masters level therapists and social workers has been nationally recognized as a unique and successful approach to addressing guardianship of children that truly does address the best interest of the child.

And its success is not only measured by the number of families that attain stability and restoration of the family structure. It is also an economic success in that we are able to maximize the financial resources by sharing the legal expertise and experience of our probate judges, our specially trained clerks and our probate court officers. With the partnership of DCF and all our staff, we immediately address the needs of families in crisis by meeting with them as they literally walk through our court doors. There is no delay in meeting with the families to develop an appropriate legal solution to protecting the child but also assessing and referring families for social service resources to get them back on their feet.

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<sup>1</sup> Connecticut State Register and Manual, 2008

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We are a system that meets the needs of our vulnerable mentally ill and mentally disabled and by addressing their legal needs in a professional yet informal and intimate setting. When you hear the most personal challenges faced by a person with Alzheimer's or schizophrenia and their families, it is critical that the parties to our system can disclose such needs in a confidential but informal legal setting.

Improving on the protection of a respondent's or conserved person's rights as you did with the recent changes to the conservatorship statutes is a perfect example of preserving an essential system but providing appropriate improvements.

We are not a system that has imposing physical structures and formalities that can often intimidate and frighten away our most needy constituents. It is the personal but professional legal process and attention that our probate system offers that allows those of us in times of crisis and in times of need to reach out for the best legal solution.

In a guardianship proceeding, as judges we look to the best interest of the child and my heart aches when I see a parent continually fail to see or to stop the harm they do to their own child because of their drug addictions or other mental health conditions. But when a parent is able to come before me, clean, sober, employed and actively engaged with her child to the point where visitation with the child can be unsupervised and increased or mom's guardianship rights reinstated, I see first hand the success of our Regional Children's Probate Court and its ability to get the families the social and health care services they need.

H.B 6027 offers clear and effective changes to the economic and legal structure of our probate system with the necessary preservation of its best qualities of informality, intimacy, and professional legal expertise and procedure.

I respectfully urge you to support this bill.

  
Beverly K. Streit-Kefalas